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More than 400 bodies have been discovered in Bucha after the Russian withdrawal. Locals have since held funerals for some of the victims

YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

WAR IN UKRAINE

Putin honours Russian brigade accused of Bucha atrocities

Julian O'Shaughnessy

Tuesday April 19 2022, 1.15pm BST, The Times

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President Putin has decorated a Russian infantry brigade accused of slaughtering unarmed civilians in the Ukrainian town of Bucha and praised its "heroism and courage".

Putin awarded the 64th Motorised Infantry Brigade the honorary title of "Guards", a designation dating back to the Soviet era for distinguished units. He said that it had defended the "Fatherland" and "upheld the sovereignty and national interests of Russia".

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A widow looks at the coffin of her husband who was killed in the fighting in Bucha

YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Oleksiy Arestovych, an adviser to President Zelensky, said this month that the brigade had “committed war crimes” in Bucha, and in nearby Hostomel and Irpin. He listed seven other units and sub-units that he said were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of civilians, torture and rape. More than 400 bodies have been discovered in Bucha since Russian forces withdrew in late March.

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Moscow said today that it had no plans to ask the United Nations to launch an international investigation into allegations of wrongdoing by Russian troops in Ukraine because it did not believe in its “impartiality”, state media reported. Putin has described as “fake” reports that Russian soldiers were guilty of atrocities during their weeks-long occupation of Bucha, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Moscow has accused British intelligence of staging the massacre in an effort to discredit the Kremlin but has provided no evidence to support its claims.

The decision to honour the brigade was an attempt by Putin to prevent “the spread of defeatism” in the army before Russia’s new military offensive in the Donbas region, said Abbas Gallyamov, a political analyst. The military decoration was, he said, a message from the Kremlin that “the godfather is with you, no matter what you do [in Ukraine], he will not give you up”.

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A resident of Bucha inspects destroyed Russian military vehicles. He, his disabled wife and son hid in their basement during the Russian occupation of the town

JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

The honour came as it emerged that a resident of Bucha who is said to have been executed by Russian soldiers on March 12 was a distant relative of Alexei Navalny, the imprisoned Kremlin critic.

Ilya Navalny, 50, was second cousin to the Russian opposition leader, neighbours told reporters from the BBC's Russian service. They suggested that he was killed because of his surname. His body was found in a mass grave in the town. Navalny, whose grandparents were Ukrainian, was thought to have other relatives near Kyiv. They are believed to be safe.

Putin has said he sent troops into Ukraine to defend Russian speakers in the Donbas from "genocide" at the hands of the Ukrainian army, an argument that has been rebuked by the International Criminal Court and the United Nations. Although thousands of civilians died in fighting between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists in 2014-15, there had been a sharp fall in deaths before Putin launched his invasion in February. Last year, a total of seven civilians were killed in hostilities in the Donetsk People's Republic, the largest separatist-held territory, according to its own statistics. More than 20,000

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